

Shady's Story, Part I

by Shady

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Summary: A runaway from Chicago finds her place among the newsies.

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Untitled Document

Shady's Story

PART I

I was dreaming. I dreamt I was an Arctic explorer of some sort, wandering around in a fur parka amongst a vast infinity of blinding white snow. Crunch, crunch, crunch went my boots. I walked forever, it seemed, until I'd found what I was looking for. The North Pole. It was just as the pictures portrayed it-a simple red and white striped pole standing up out of the snow. I hurried towards my goal, and reached out a mittened hand to touch it and then the earth trembled. I paused, so close to touching the Pole. The earth trembled again, and the ground opened. I stumbled and fell into an endless abyss of shining blue ice, and began falling, falling, falling

and then I woke up. I was still cold, very cold, but there wasn't any snow, or North Pole, or icy abyss in sight. Just straw. Straw and wood.

> Then I remembered. I remembered about the escape from home, about stowing away in an empty boxcar on a train headed for well, I wasn't particularly sure where the train was headed. I didn't really care much, just so long as it wasn't to Nebraska or Ohio or somewhere equally horrid-just so long as it was away from home. Or what I used to call home.
 I sneezed. The old straw scattered on the bottom of the boxcar was dusty and prickly. It felt that a million tiny needles were digging into my body, even through all the layers of clothes I had on. I stood up with a groan, stumbling around a bit as I adjusted my footing according to the movement of the train. I paced around a bit, trying to warm up, but nothing really seemed to help. It was freezing in there, and I hate being cold. Everyone always says that

it's better to die in a blizzard, because you just go to sleep, but I don't think I'd mind dying of heat in the Sahara one bit well, okay, I would mind the dying part, but at least I'd be warm.

> I was hungry, too. I fished around in the pockets of my coat for something to eat. Actually, it was my brother's coat. Nearly all the clothes I had on were his. None of the girlish things that I'd had at home were suitable for travelling or anything. Besides, boys' clothes are so much more comfortable it's not fair.
 After a bit of searching through the coins and the other whatnot I'd stuffed into the voluminous pockets, my hand connected with something cold and hard. Of course. Mum's biscuits. I fished it the yellow lump of half-cooked cornmeal out and looked at it with distaste. Ugh. But it was something, and I was really too hungry to care, so I choked the thing down and tried to keep gagging to a minimum. I could actually feel the bread hitting the bottom of my stomach like a rock. Oh, well, at least it was food.

> I got my mind off of the awful biscuit by trying to figure out where the Hell I was. I was on a train, heading from Chicago to God knows where. I hadn't actually bothered to check into the destination, smart girl that I am. I suppose, however, when you're on the lam, beggars can't be choosers.
 Seeing as I wasn't too eager to pull open one of the big side doors and leap from the moving train or anything, I just decided to wait it out and roll with the punches. So I paced around, sang a rousing rendition of "99 Bottles of Beer On The Wall," paced, threw straw around, polished the coins in my pockets, paced, and, well, paced some more.

> Right when I was in the middle of the 42nd chorus of "I Am The Very Model Of A Modern Major General," the train's brakes screeched, and my little wooden prison shuddered to a halt. I rejoiced, but not for long-already I could hear men's rough voices as they traveled from boxcar to boxcar, unloading the train's cargo. It then hit me that if anyone from the railroad station found me, they probably wouldn't be entirely too happy about it, and God knows what would happen. I might be beaten or taken to jail or, worst of all, they might even take me back home. Homie don't play dat-I hadn't spent hour upon hour cooped up in this freezing cold boxcar to just be discovered and sent home again.
 I hastily burrowed back into the straw, praying that it would sufficiently cover me so I wouldn't be noticed. I heard footsteps come closer and closer, and then the two giant side doors were pulled open. I winced as light poured in, causing my dark-accustomed eyes to water. I trembled anxiously as I heard two men's voices, right outside the car.

> "Nothin' in here, Bill," came one voice.
 "Good. We're almost finis-hey, just a second- there's somethin' in that corner"

> My eyes widened as I heard the man heave himself up into the boxcar and begin to walk towards my hiding place. This was not good. When he was practically standing on top of me, I emerged out of the straw with a maniacal yell, dashed past him, and took a leap out of the boxcar.
 "A stowaway! Grab 'im!" yelled the man, after getting over the initial shock of my appearance.

> I hit the gravel running-it kinda hurt, but I was too intent on getting away to care. Fortunately, my element of surprise had bought me a few precious seconds, and so I had a bit of a lead on the two men.
 Looking for some route of escape as I ran through the trainyards, I finally spotted some red brick buildings ahead of me, so I ducked into the alley between them.

> I suppose the guys hadn't seen where I'd gone, or didn't care all that much about catching me. Either way, I'd couldn't hear or see them any more. Whew. I leaned back against the wall of the alley, breathing heavily as my adrenaline slowly went down. Next time, I'd

just buy a ticket.
 Now that I'd gotten away from the train, I could devote my attentions to figuring out just where I'd been taken to. When I had sufficiently calmed myself down, I walked cautiously towards the opposite end of the alley, where I could see a patch of sidewalk and cobblestone street. When I emerged on the other side, it was like stepping into an anthill.

> There were people everywhere. The streets were crowded, and there wasn't an inch of space between all of the brick stores and houses and market stalls. The whole place just had a very fast-paced, busy feel to it, so I figured that my train had stopped in a major city. Which city, I had yet to find out.
 I started to walk down the sidewalk, weaving through the throngs of people. I stand at only about 5'2", so the crowds weren't helping me see where I was going very well. I craned my neck to look at all the signs and buildings, running into people and things in the process. I stopped near a street sign, and squinted up at it to see what it said.

> Broadway.
 Broadway? Broadway hmm hadn't that been the place my Aunt Kathie was always rambling about? Broadway was in New York City?! But I couldn't be all the way in New York!

> But I was, apparently. Unless ever major city in America has a street named "Broadway," which I wasn't sure of. My suspicions were confirmed when I was roughly shoved aside by a fat man pushing a cart.
 "Get the hell outta my way, kid!" he intoned in very New York dialect.

> New York City. Wow. Well, now that the "where the Hell am I?" mystery had been solved, I turned to the next-the "so what am I supposed to do now" mystery. Mum had always said that NYC was a very rough place. A very rough and dirty place that no self-respecting person would ever actually want to go to. Well, Mum, here I am. So there.
 I ducked back into an alley to ponder my situation. First of all, I knew nothing about the city. So, technically, I was lost. Second, I didn't know anybody who did know about the city, so I was also alone. Third, I had the curse of being female. Apparently, this rendered me highly dependent and fodder for all manner of psychos. Not that I believed in that, but other people did, which was the dangerous part.

> Lost, alone, and female. Such a winning combination.
 Well, even more dangerous than being lost, alone, and female was looking lost, alone, and female. I was immediately thankful I'd had the sense to take my brother's clothes. Albeit baggy, they made me look quite like a boy, hiding all my recently acquired curves and such. Except my hair. Long, thick, and utterly unmanageable, it never really wanted to pick any particular color, and settled with an odd mixture of copper, blond, and varying shades of brown. At any rate, it went past my shoulder blades and looked very, uhm, un-boyish. Fortunately, I'd also swiped my brother's big floppy hat, so with great difficulty I twisted my hair up and stuffed it under that. I pulled the brim of the hat low over my forehead to cast a shadow over my face, squared my shoulders, and tried to adopt a "you touch, I kill" sort of demeanor. Perfect.

> I walked back out onto the street, thinking as I wandered aimlessly. I was really hungry by now, but above all, I needed a place to stay. Was there such a thing as a "Runaway Hotel"? I doubted it.
 At least I had money. Not much, but it was something. I came to what must have been Central Park, and sauntered up to a man vending hot dogs and bought one, then scurried over to a bench and began to wolf it down as if I hadn't eaten in a month. It was gone in under a minute, and I sat for a moment and marveled over how much brighter the world seems when your stomach is full.

> I stood up and began to wander some more. Dusk was already here,

and autumn night was rapidly approaching. I tried desperately to find some place, any place where I could sleep, but found nothing. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that I really wasn't going to get anywhere on my own, and decided to actually ask someone. I scanned the throngs of people for a moment, and my eyes eventually settled on a tall, chestnut-haired lady who was purchasing eggs from one of the many stalls set up alongside the street. I walked casually over to her, and tried to lower my voice about an octave.
 "'Scuse me, ma'am you wouldn't happen to know of any place where a boy could stay the night, would you?"

> The lady looked me over with a set of bright green eyes. "Well, if you're lookin' for wages as well, you might try the Newsboys' Lodgin' House. Where're you from, laddie?" she inquired, seeming mildly suspicious.
 I dodged the question and inquired further, "Newsboys' Lodging House? Where can I find it?"

> "Ten blocks north," she muttered. "Where are you from?" she asked again, as if she couldn't fathom someone not knowing where the Newsboys' Lodging House was.
 "Chicago," I said, backing off. "Anyway thanks for your help." And with that, I fled.

> Ten blocks north ten blocks north which way was north? I inspected a nearby tree for moss or something similar. No luck. I thought about asking someone else, but I figured that if I did that, it would blow my whole "I'm really not lost and alone" cover, so I didn't.
 Instead, I just stood for a moment, stock still, and tried to feel a northwards pull, or something. Before I could feel any sort of inner homing device, a couple kids ran past, waving wooden swords. I wasn't expecting this, so they knocked me off balance, and I toppled into some roadside mud. Fortunately, only a few dozen people had seen this mishap, and only about half of them bothered to stop and laugh and point as I picked myself up.

> I was now lost, cold, alone, still pretty hungry, female, and completely splattered in mud. Damn. Nevertheless, I continued upon my quest for the elusive Newsboys' Lodging House, my only known hope for shelter. I picked the first direction I started in, and hoped it was north.<center>

The next hour or so seemed almost like a race against the sun. Light was swiftly fading, by the minute it seemed. I walked and I walked and I walked, until it seemed my feet were about to fall right off at the joint. Eventually, my body just did a "so long, sucker," and gave out. It was pitch black by now, if you don't count the streetlights, and I simply collapsed upon the first doorstep I reached. It was composed of a flight of about five dull gray cement stairs and two iron railings, and wasn't precisely what I'd had in mind when I'd wanted a place to stay. I was too exhausted to care, though, weakly pillowing my head on my arms and drawing my knees up to my chest. The last thoughts I remember were small prayers- prayers that I wouldn't get kidnapped, or stabbed, or raped, or frozen to death. These worries were soon put to rest as I blacked out into near-unconsciousness, my only thoughts of sleep.

I was awakened quite rudely the next morning by a boot slamming into the small of my back, and a large form toppling head over heels over me with a loud yell. Whoever it was had successfully knocked me from my little step, and I did an equally painful and ungainly descent down the stairs, rolling over and over until I finally connected with the unforgiving street. Ouch.

> I groaned and decided to just lay there, too bruised to feel like standing. Abruptly, a voice interrupted my pain.
 "Mush! You klutz you fell down the stairs again? That's the third week in a row!" the

voice, which was male and carried a heavy New York accent, didn't sound overly concerned- rather, it was laughing.

> A half-whimper came from my left. "It wasn't my fault this time! I swear! I tripped over over him!" came the voice of the tripped. It sounded accusing.
 "Who's that? I haven't seen 'im before" said the first voice. "Hey, kid, get up! You all right?"

> Reluctantly, I picked myself up off of the street, stood up, and turned to look at the owner of the voice I'd heard. It belonged to a tall boy, probably about sixteen or seventeen years old. He had a lightly tanned face, and was dressed like the newsboys I'd seen in the papers a few times.
 "Uhm h'lo," I croaked, then turned around to see whose boot had given me the bruise, which I was sure was gonna be permanent. A muscular boy with brown curly hair narrowed his equally brown eyes up at me.

> "Thanks a lot, kid. You nearly killed me."
 Unthinking, I responded, "You're welcome." I suppose I could have been a bit more gracious-I probably had almost killed him.

> To my surprise, the boy picked himself up, dusted off, and actually grinned at me. "No harm done, I s'pose," he said amiably. "Like Jack said, I do it all the time."
 I turned around to look at Jack again. He glanced me over, then said, "I don't remember seein' you before, kid. You new?"

> "Well, uhm, yeah," I replied intelligently, inwardly grateful that my hat had stayed in place and I still looked sufficiently boyish. "I was actually looking for the Newsboys' Lodging House. You know where that is?"
 Both of the guys looked at me, then at one another, and burst out laughing.

> "What's so funny?!" I asked indignantly.
 "You you're trying to find the Lodging House?" chortled Mush. "That's a riot! You've only been sleepin' on its steps all night long!"

> My eyes widened as they finally noticed the lettering above the door of the building. Lo and behold, they read:
 Manhattan Newsboys' Lodging House.

> I blushed furiously under the shadow of my hat. "Oh well then I guess I've found it."
 Jack grinned at me. "I guess you have." He stepped forward and offered his hand. "The name's Jack Kelly, but they actually call me Cowboy. The lunkhead that tripped over you on the stairs is Mush," he said, gesturing to the curly-haired boy.

> I shook his hand and grinned tentatively back. "Hi," I said, not wanting to give him my name. For me, anonymity meant safety.
 Jack gave me an odd glance, but didn't question me about it. Instead, he asked, "You signed in with Kloppman yet?"

> "Kloppman?" I echoed.
 "Kloppman. He runs the House, and if you're looking to stay here, you gotta check in with him. C'mon, I'll take you to him," the tall boy offered, and I followed him through the door. The interior of the House was a bit dark and chilly, but it was much warmer than outside, at any rate. Jack led me down a short hallway and into a sort of check-in room. A big, curved oak counter dominated the room, and behind it sat an elderly, bespectacled man who reminded me very much of a tortoise.

> "Hey, Kloppy, we got another boarder for you," Jack said, and I stepped forward, and Kloppman nodded at me with a sort of half-smile.
 "It's twenty cents a month for board. You are responsible for finding your own meals," the old man informed me. "If you don't have enough money with you right now, I'll just put it on credit."

> I dug the required amount of money out of my coat pockets and shoved the coppers across the counter to him.
 Kloppman picked up a quill, and poised it over his ledger. "Now name?"

> I bit my lip in hesitation. I didn't want to use my real name,

despite the fact that Whitney was commonly used for boys. So I thought quickly, and decided it was safer to remain anonymous for the time being.
 "Do you really gotta know that?" I asked tentatively.

> Kloppman did a funny little half-raise of the eyebrows, but replied, "Naah, it can wait. You're in. Kelly, show the boy upstairs to an empty bunk, willya?"
 "Sure thing, Kloppey." Jack proceeded to lead me around a doorframe and up a narrow, creaky flight of wooden steps. We arrived in what I guessed was the main bunkroom. It was filled with about twelve bunk beds, and several other newsboys were milling around, playing cards or sleeping or talking to one another. To my dismay, Jack slammed a fist against the wall, immediately commanding everyone's attention.

> "Listen up, boys we've got a newbie. He just joined up with the gang," Cowboy said loudly. I was greeted by a varied chorus of "hiya"s and "hello there"s, and nodded silently in return.
 Jack continued his spiel by individually introducing each of the newsies.

> "That beautiful blonde over there, we call him Kid Blink," he said with a grin, gesturing towards a tall boy with a patch over his left eye. Blink gave me a goofy grin, and waved.
 "That over there is Specs" A boy with small round glasses nodded to me from across the room.

> "This is Crutchy, and next to him is Skittery." Both boys had curly hair, and Crutchy supported his right shoulder with, well, a crutch. Skittery, a well-built boy with a rather dour expression, nodded over to me as well.
 Now Cowboy gestured to a short, baby faced Italian who was puffing a cigar as he played a game of Solitaire. "That's Racetrack Higgins, resident smartass and gambling addict," he said with a teasing tone to his voice. Racetrack shot Jack a grin, dark eyes flickering over me briefly. "Heya."

> "Hi," I responded, trying to keep my voice at a continual low. I couldn't help noticing that he was awfully cute not just cute, actually, but really handsome. He-
 Jack's voice interrupted my musings with more introductions. "and that's Itey, Snitch, Bumlets, Boots, and Dutchy." The five waved over at me and continued their game of jacks.

> "So, now that you know just about everyone, we gotta find you a bunk the one above Mush's is free, so you can have that one," Cowboy informed me.
 I nodded, and walked over to my newly acquired sleeping space. It took a minute for me to figure out how exactly to get up to the bed-the bunk beds' frames were ancient, a bit rusty, and had no ladders or handholds-but eventually I managed to haul myself up onto the lumpy, squeaky mattress. Not exactly high quality, but it beat the hell out of sleeping on a cement step outside all night.

> No sooner had I gotten up onto my bunk, then I had to figure out how to get back down again. The boys were all filing out the door and traipsing down the steps.
 I glanced down at Mush, and asked, "Where are they all going?"

> He gave me a thoroughly strange look in return. "To sell papes, a'course. That's what newsies do."
 I tried not to look as much of an idiot as I felt, and jumped to the floor. "Oh. Right. Of course. Well, uh, let's get a move-on, then" I said, and walked rather briskly out the door.

> I went with the flow, following the boys along the streets for a couple blocks until we came to a pair of gigantic iron gates. I read the lettering above the gates:
 New York World Distribution Center.

> Oh. This must be where we buy the papers. I followed Mush and the

others up a large wooden boardwalk, and was jostled into line. It moved fairly quickly, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of an iron-barred window which had a rather portly, unpleasant-looking man standing behind it.
 He looked me over with a dull gray eye, and barked, "Whaddya want, shrimp?"

> I widened my eyes, slightly taken aback, but I managed to emulate the other boys, stuttering, "Tw twenty papes," as I shoved my coppers under the bars.
 The man seemed to derive a bit of amusement from my unsettlement, allowing himself a short, humorless chuckle before tossing a stack of papers at me and turning to the next person in line.

> I didn't bother to count them, just scurried down the steps to safety.
 "Don't let the Weasel get to you," advised Davey. He was a well-built newsie with dark curly hair. Unlike the others, he stayed with his family and younger brother Les, not at the lodging house.

> I never dreamed I'd be worrying about machismo, but at that moment, I was. I shrugged indifferently, trying to keep a tough demeanor. "Yeah, well, he isn't worth losing my top over," I responded. The group started walking back out to the streets.
 "Hey, kid, you wanna sell with me and Race? We can show you the ropes and all," offered Jack.

> Inwardly relieved for the guidance, I nodded. "Sure thing. Where do we sell?"
 "The tracks."

> "The harbor."
 Race and Jack spoke simultaneously, then looked at one another.

> "The tracks," Race insisted again. "The Brooklyn boys have all but taken over the harbor area."
 "So, as the leader of the Manhattan boys, I'll kick 'em out," retorted Jack. "Aren't you sick of the tracks, anyway? You spend half your day there."

> "Me? Tire of the tracks? Never!"
 I decided not to get involved. The harbor actually sounded more pleasant than any racetrack—I'd never liked horses much, at least not since I got thrown off of one into a muddy lake when I was ten.

> The harbor it was. I tagged along behind the two, decided to just watch and learn for the moment. As we walked, Jack and Race waved their papers and manipulated headlines with ease, selling faster than I'd ever thought possible.
 After a bit, I decided to try my luck. I opened one of my papers up and scanned for a good story. There weren't many, so I just picked a headline, waved the paper above my head, and shouted:

> "EXTRA! EXTRA! OKRA FARMING REACHES AN ALL-TIME HIGH! BIG SPROUTS ARE FARMER'S DELIGHT!"
 Boy, that was a helluva winner. The most attention that little announcement got me were short bursts of laughter from my selling partners.

> I scowled at them. "Hey, it's not like I've done this before"
 "Look, kid, you've gotta pick at least a semi-interesting headline. If you can't find one, make one up," Race advised me. "Here," he demonstrated.

> "FARMERS ENGORGE UPON GIANT, SUPERNATURAL VEGETABLES! FARMING REACHES A GOLDEN AGE; STOCK MARKET SOARS!" he yelled, and ended up selling about five papers in three seconds.
 "Oh. Right. Gotcha." I hunted for another likely headline. Here was one: President approves new immigration law.

> "GOVERNMENT STRUGGLES TO CONTROL ALIEN INVASION!" I screeched. One, two, three, four, five, six papers were sold. Whoa.
 Jack and Race gave me approving grins as I pocketed all the coins I'd gained.

> "Looks like you got the hang of it!"
 "Yeah hey, seeing as you've just sold your first set of papes, you need an official newsie name," Jack declared.

> "Newsie name?" I echoed inanely.
 "Yeah, a newsie name," said Race. "Every good newsie has one. 'Sides, if you lose your real name, the bulls can't find you as easily."

> Bulls? Oh. The cops. Well, avoiding discovery was certainly a benefit. "Oh, okay. So what's my newsie name?" I asked.
 Race pondered this for a moment. "Well hrm I don't know all that much about ya," he said. You could say that again.

> "Yeah. Naming you is gonna be harder, since you've been so darned shady about everything. Not that it's uncommon most of us are trying to forget where we've been and all, too," Jack chipped in.
 "Hey, that's it! Shady. We'll call you Shady," proclaimed Race.

> Hey, I liked it, and said so. Shady it was very well, very me. The other two grinned.
 "Good. Now we won't have to call you 'kid' anymore."

> I was mildly pleased to hear that. So, I was Shady now. Gaining a new name seemed like I was breaking the final tie to my old life, to which I was positive I'd never want to return.
 After a few more paces, we walked around a bend, and before us was the harbor. Boats were everywhere, many in disrepair, and seamen hung about here and there, cursing at one another as they played with sets of weathered cards.

> I could see small groups of other newsies hanging around near the docks, and followed Jack and Race as we walked towards them. As we got closer, I noticed a common theme in the appearance of these particular newsies-all looked much, much tougher then any I had already seen. Most of the boys looked extremely muscular, and carried weapons openly. They could have only been Brooklynites. However, they greeted Jack and Race enthusiastically, and were greeted just as easily in return.
 As Jack was spit-shaking (if there was one bad thing about being a newsie, it was the nauseating spit-shake) with some of the guys, a voice rose above the crowd.

> "Well, well Jacky-Boy's come to see me again," it drawled.
 Moments later, the other newsies parted to make way for a short, freckled boy with a key dangling from his neck. He carried a cane in one hand, and was the sort that seemed to have a permanently smug look on his face.

> Jack glanced up, and grinned. "Heya, Spot."
 They spit-shook, and Spot asked, "You been sellin' in my territory, Kelly?"

> "'Course I have, Conlon."
 Spot grinned. "Consider yourself lucky, 'cause you Manhattan types are the only ones I'd let do that."

> His territory? I didn't see "Spot Conlon" written anywhere. Stupid territorial males. I rolled my eyes beneath the shadow of my hat.
 I wasn't sure if Spot noticed or not, but at any rate, he turned to look at me. "And who's this shrimpy little tagalong, Jack?"

> I bristled, and replied before Jack could open his mouth. "This 'shrimpy little tagalong' isn't all that smaller than you, shorty," I snapped.
 Race winced, and began slightly shaking his head "no". I paid no attention to him, or Jack, who was looking rather amused at my outburst.

> Spot Conlon, however, was not. His bluish-green eyes widened then narrowed at me. "Shorty? Nobody talks to me that way," he informed me.
 "Looks like I just did," I replied, further digging my own grave.

> "Seems that you, shrimpy, haven't heard of me before. I," he said, "am Spot Conlon, leader of the Brooklyn newsboys, and I don't take crap from anybody."
 I made no effort to stifle a disdainful laugh. "Am I supposed to be impressed, or something?" My inner self was yelling at me to just shut the hell up, because even if Spot was shorter than just about everybody else, he was still a whole lot

bigger than me. I need to learn how to listen to my inner self, because she's a very handy little individual.

> Abruptly, Spot reached over and gave me a small shove. I stumbled backwards, but regained my balance fairly quickly.
 "You're really wanting to start somethin', aren't you?" the Brooklyn boy jeered.

> "If thinking that everyone bowing down to an egotistical, worthless little weasel like you is just absurd, then yes, I am starting something," I snapped back. Oooh, shut UP, Shady, shut UP!
 Just then, a slender, feminine figure with bright red hair emerged from behind a nearby pile of junk.

> "Spot Conlon!" the girl yelled. "What are you doing, now? We've got papes to sell!"
 Wait, wait, wait. Hold the line. This was a girl. And she was a newsie, apparently. Nobody told me there were such things as female newsies. I was about to shed my disguise right then and there and do some serious questioning, but it was too late.

> I turned back to look at Spot, and all I saw was a fist flying full-force for my face. I saw it too late to avoid it, so my left eye ended up taking the hit full force. By some miracle of God, I stayed standing. I saw pretty little yellow and white stars, then shook my head to clear it, and threw a semi-blind punch in retaliation. Lo and behold, I slammed His Majesty smack in the nose.
 I guess he wasn't expecting such a hard punch from such a petite individual, because Conlon stumbled backwards and fell, hard. By this time, Jack had taken initiative to separate the two of us, to my great relief.

> The redheaded girl also came running over. She caught Spot by the ear and hauled him off the ground-it looked pretty painful. "Spot Conlon! You idiot! Slamming girls in the face!" she screeched into his captive ear.
 Girl? What girl? Oh, yeah, I was a girl. But how could she have known? Just then, I noticed a familiar lock of thick, coppery hair fall over my shoulder. Spot's punch had knocked my hat off, and with my long tresses down, I looked very feminine indeed.

> Jack, Race, and Spot gaped openly.
 "He's a girl!" yelled Race, once he'd picked his jaw up off of the ground.

> "You mean she," said Jack, blinking rapidly.
 Spot didn't look too remorseful that he'd just slugged a girl half his size. He was too busy mopping up the blood pouring from his nose.

> The redheaded newsie gave them all strange looks. "What, you didn't know?" she asked.
 "Shady we thought you were a guy!" Jack said, stating the obvious.

> I finally found my voice, picked up my hat and dusted it off. "That was actually my intent. I, uhm, didn't know there were girl newsies, and didn't want to be tossed out of the lodging house," I said quietly. Boy, did I feel like an idiot it did feel good to have the truth come out, though. I doubted I could've kept up my masquerade for much longer.
 Now that he was over the initial shock, Cowboy appeared to find the situation extremely funny. He threw back his head and laughed. And laughed. And laughed. "You d-didn't think that girls could" he couldn't finish his sentence.

> I rolled my eyes and waited impatiently for him to stop. "No, I didn't hey, it wasn't that funny!"
 Apparently it was, but Jack finally stopped his laughing. The redheaded girl turned to me and extended a hand.

> "They call me Flame," she said. "Sorry about Conlon he's such an idiot," she lamented.
 I grinned, shaking her hand briefly. "I'm Shady and yeah, I gathered that part." I gingerly touched my swelling eye. "Got a helluva punch, though. Ouch." I'd have a completely black eye by the end of the day.

> I glanced over at Race. He wasn't gaping at me any more, just had

this odd sort of pensive look on his face. I quirked an eyebrow at him, then turned to Jack.
 "So, uh, where do I go now?" I asked. Chances were, I wouldn't be able to stay in the boys' lodging house. Damn.

> "Well, Flame here is the semi-official leader of the Manhattan girls house," he responded, grinning at Flame. "You got an open bunk, Flamer?"
 "Yeah, we can probably find one for her. You got any stuff you need to grab from the boys' place?"

> I shook my head no. All I had were the clothes on my back and the coins in my pocket.
 "Arrright then." Flame nodded over at Spot. "We'll catch up with you guys in a bit in the meantime, Jacky, make sure my boy doesn't bleed to death, okay?" she requested with a grin.

> She and I got dual glares from Spot. I made a face and winked my good eye at him, then followed Flame away from the harbor.<center>

After a short jaunt around Manhattan, we arrived in front of a narrow building. It looked remarkably like the boys' lodging house, except it lacked the lettering above the door that identified it as a lodging house. Come to think of it, the place was in a state of minor disrepair, and lacked the obvious upkeep the boys' place had. As Flame led me through the door, I wondered aloud, "Who do I have to sign in with? Does Kloppman run this place, too?"

> The redhead shot me a grin. "Kloppman? Nuh-uh us Manhattan girls are a real independent lot. Nobody runs us. We like it that way, and do just fine."
 "But how do you pay rent for the building?"

> "We don't. They used to harass us about paying for the lot and stuff, but this building's been abandoned for years, so we pretty much just took over the joint. After a while, the legal types just stopped worrying about us and we don't get the bills or nothing anymore."
 I nodded, following her up a narrow, creaky flight of steps and into the main (and only) bunkroom. It was decidedly smaller than the boys' place, with only four rusty bunk beds occupying the room. Despite this, it still seemed a bit crowded.

> "Hey, girls! We've got one another one meet Shady," announced Flame.
 Seven pairs of eyes turned in my direction. Seven other girls? This was a small house.

> "Hey." A pale, freckled girl with shoulder-length dark brown hair glanced me over. "The name's Owl. Welcome to our happy home," she drawled.
 "I'm Piper," offered another girl. She was about my height, with hazel eyes and wavy auburn hair.

> "They call me Cats," came a voice from far, far above me. I stepped back a foot and craned my neck to see who it was. Cats had bright green eyes and reddish brown hair. She stood about six feet, I estimated, and towered over the likes of short little me. "Nice to meet ya."
 A shorter blonde girl stood next to her, and offered me a smile. "Hiya. I'm Cheeky."

> "I'm Copper..." said another occupant of the house. She was thin, with very blue eyes and curly copper hair. It wasn't hard to guess where her name came from.
 "Apple," stated a skinny girl with short jet black hair.

> A fair-skinned, green-eyed girl offered me a hand. "Trapper's the name," she said.
 After introductions were complete, I nodded to everyone and sort of half-smiled. "Hey so, uhm, where do I sleep?"

> Flame pointed to a bunk closest to the window. "There's one bed left. It's the one above mine nobody else wanted to sleep next to that drafty window."
 Drafty windows. Fun. "Yeah, well, I'm sure this one'll do." If Fortune favored me, I'd somehow conquer getting

into the top bunk without breaking my neck.

> Turning back to the other seven, Flame asked, "You girls finish selling already?"
 "A'course we did. You know we're twice as fast as any one of the boys," Copper said smugly.

> "Yeah. They don't have our girlish charm or, something," Owl chipped in.
 Flame grinned. "Right. Let's head out to lunch, then, girlies. Shady, you got any money?"

> "'Course I do" I responded, jingling the coppers in my pocket. I'd sold all 20 papes. Not bad, for my first day.
 The redhead nodded approvingly. "To Tibby's it is, then!"

> We traipsed down the stairs and out to the street. I'd immediately felt at home with the other girls, which wasn't any big surprise-I'd always been able to adjust to new situations pretty rapidly. It was more than just feeling comfortable, though, it was as if I'd discovered where I was really supposed to be. I didn't have much time to ponder, however; everyone else kept me on my toes with their lively chatter. We walked down the street to a small restaurant I'd noticed earlier, and entered en masse.
 It seemed that the other newsies had already beaten us there-most of the tables and booths were already filled with the boys I'd met earlier at the lodging house. Actually, even Spot was there. He looked a little sulky with his bruised nose, but he was there. Oh, joy of joys. We saw each other at nearly the same time-I got a glare, he got a smirk.

> Most of the Manhattan girls went to sit with their respective boyfriends. It didn't take long to figure out who was with who-Apple promptly sat down on Mush's lap, Owl shoved Skittery over to make room for her, Copper sat with Davey, and Trapper with Jack. Bumlets caught Cats by the elbow as she passed him, pulling her down into the chair next to him. Piper sat down on the lap of a boy I hadn't met that morning- he was tall, with high cheekbones and aqua eyes. Cheeky informed me that his name was Snoddy. Ooookay. She, Flame, and I conquered a booth of our own.
 "Hey, Flame, weren't you with Spot?" I asked casually.

> "Yeah, occasionally. Only when he's not being an idiot, and that's a rare occasion indeed."
 "I gathered."

> I ordered a soda, chili, and pastrami from the waiter. I couldn't remember the last time I ate, and I was starved. While the others and I waited for our food, a few of the boys sauntered up to our table.
 "Shady, that eye of yours is getting darker by the minute," proclaimed Jack.

> "Yeah isn't getting slugged on the first day some kind of record, or something?" Blink inquired.
 Cheeky grinned. "So is giving Conlon a bloody nose."

> The others snickered at the thought. My knuckles were still killing me-the last time I'd used them like that was in the second grade when some idiot broke all my colored pencils in half. Jerk.
 Race stepped up. "So, uh, you get Shady all settled?" he asked Flame. I noted that he seemed more normal, not as quiet as he was earlier. I also noted that he didn't have a girl with him. Cha-ching!

> "Yup. Gave her the drafty-window bed. She's a full fledged Manhattan girl, now."
 "Aye. I feel so honored," I drawled.

> He looked me over with a bright eye. "Y'know, doll, if you don't like that bed, I'm sure we could find you one over at the boys' place," he suggested lasciviously.
 Inwardly, I did a double-take. Hold the line was he flirting with me? I glanced at Flame. Judging from her smirk, he was.

> Outwardly, I arched an eyebrow. "I'm sure you could I'm also sure you could find a bed for just about every other girl in NYC. How special."
 Jack giggled (an odd picture, believe me) and clapped Race on the shoulder. "Yeah, watch out for this one, Shady he's a

real ladies' man. Had himself a date just oh last year, wasn't it?" he teased.

> Race rolled his (beautiful!) brown eyes, and I winked at Jack. "Mhmm I'll be sure to watch my back."
 There was another collective snicker, and then conversation turned to other things. I set upon my chili and such with a vengeance-chances are, I ate like a rabid wolf, but at that particular point in time I didn't give a damn how I looked, so long as my stomach was full. When my hunger pains had finally subsided, I was able to turn my mind to other things.

> Race had sat down next to Cheeky, and just happened to be across the table from me. We unconsciously started up one of those eye-games-me sneaking a look at him and vice versa, and then both of us feigning disinterest and playing with the sugar packets, or something. I half-heartedly listened to the conversation, occasionally murmuring some mediocre response.
 A query from Mush snapped me back to the present. "So, anyone else going to the pier tonight? It's a good night for swimmin'," he stated.

> Nearly everyone responded with enthusiastic agreement. Flame glanced out the window. "Let's get going before it gets any darker," she ordered. So we did.
 Everyone got up and began to meander on down the streets toward the harbor. I must have looked exceptionally elated or something, because Flame yanked me off to one side, and informed me, "Don't be too taken with Race. He flirts with any girl who'll listen."

> Great. Way to pop my bubble.
 "Oh I'm, uh, not. I just think he's good-looking and stuff, that's all," I fibbed. The redhead seemed satisfied with my answer, though, and didn't say much else.

> Eventually, we reached the pier. Several of the boys pulled off their shirts (much to the delight of the girls) and made a beeline for the water. I decided to hang back and just watch for a while, and shuffled out towards the very end of the pier and sat down, feet dangling a few feet above the water. It looked black and cold, and I wasn't in the mood to swim, anyway.
 I looked down into the water ruminatively, and was just beginning to go into one of my Zoned Out moods when I heard quiet footsteps behind me. For some reason, it took little effort to figure out who it was.

> "Whaddya want, Race?"
 "How'd you know it was me?" He sounded surprised, and mildly disappointed.

> "Call it an educated guess. You weren't planning on shoving me into the harbor, now were you?" I inquired.
 To my jubilation, he came and sat down next to me with an innocent grin. "Me, do such a thing? Never. Not that you weren't a perfect target" he commented.

> "So, what do you want?"
 "Merely to bask in your glory, Great One," he drawled, then rolled his eyes. "Why do I have to want something? Can't I just sit here to sit here?"

> "You could but I've got a feeling you're not that type. You've got an ulterior motive," I said bluntly.
 Race gave me a curious glance-oh, those eyes-and asked, "A little suspicious, aren't we, doll?"

> I gave him a smirk. "Only when I think I've got reason to be. Look, I'm not into players, okay? I'm not planning on being just another pawn in the game." Spiel said, I stood up and walked back down to the shore, not waiting for a response.
 Great, Shady, just great. Why did I always let silly things like standards get in my way? Now that he'd learned I wasn't interested in being an addition to any harem, he'd probably drop me like a hot coal.

> It was rapidly becoming too dark to see, so everyone decided to turn in for the night. I walked back to the lodging house with the rest of the Manhattan girls and crawled up into my frigid little bed.

Thankfully, the night was pretty warm, and the cool breeze blowing in through the cracked window put me right to sleep.<center>

The next week passed fairly uneventfully. I adjusted to the schedule of a newsie pretty quickly-it still took a crowbar and a bucket of cold water to get me out of bed in the morning, as it always has. Race had toned down his act considerably-in fact, he didn't say much to me at all, and I halfheartedly regretted telling him those things that night on the pier. Every so often, though, I'd catch him glancing at me, and whenever we happened to touch, there was always some current of static electricity, and we both got zapped.

> One particular morning-a Friday-I was prodded awake by Flame, as usual.
 "Get up already, Shady. It's ten o'clock, for crying out loud."

> I opened one eye, and croaked, "Ten o'clock? Why didn't you wake me up at six, like usual? All the papes have probably been sold!"
 Piper wandered up, and rolled her eyes. "Didn't anyone tell you? It's June 27th."

> I sat up and looked at her blearily. "What's so special about June 27th?"
 "It's like a holiday for the newsies. Today's the day we beat Pulitzer a few years ago, so to remember it, nobody sells papes."

> "Yeah," Copper chimed in. "And we always have a big party at Medda's place. We're gonna head over there in a little bit to get ready. It's so much fun, Shady! She lends us all these dresses and we get to look all girlish and pretty and"
 "I'm sure it's a riot," I muttered, and flopped back down onto my pillow. This lasted, oh, 2 seconds, when several pairs of hands hauled me off of my bed and dumped me unceremoniously on the floor.

> "Oh, no you don't," said Owl sternly. "You're one of us, so you have to come to Irving Hall and act stupid and girly with all the rest of us."
 "Aaah, fine," I grumbled. "Always knew I should've been a boy"

> The others grinned. "Hurry up, then," said Flame. "We're gonna leave for our fun-filled day of primping in just a few minutes."
 I pulled on some clothes and ran a brush through my hair, then we all trooped down the steps and made the short walk to Medda's theater.

> Medda was a semi-Swedish performer who was roughly 60% legs and 40% chest, and wore only pink. Needless to say, the boys were crazy about her. She was nice enough, I suppose, but rather creeped me out. at any rate, she was going on the road for a week and allowed the Manhattan girls free reign of her spare wardrobe, dressing rooms, and such.
 We entered through one of the side stage doors and went up a flight of stairs to the main dressing room, a sunny, carpeted room with lots of mirrors and lights. There were chests of drawers everywhere, and we all had a ball looting each one. Medda had more dresses and costumes than I'd ever seen in my life, and once we had finished pulling them all out, the floor was literally covered with outfits of all shapes and sizes.

> I plopped down onto an oversized cushion and watched the others dig through the various ensembles. With a shriek, Cheeky unearthed a short white cotton dress embroidered with tiny red flowers.
 "I love this one!" she exclaimed. "Found my dress."

> She tried it on and it was a perfect fit. We collectively oohed and aahed, and then Piper found a gold dress that she liked, and we oohed and aahed some more. Apple discovered a simple long-sleeved black one, and Trapper got a short green dress that perfectly matched her eyes. Copper chose a dress that remarkably resembled the one Medda usually wore (why, I'll never know), and Owl picked a short sky blue

outfit. After spending roughly an hour trying to decide between "the slinky black one" or the "loud red one," Flame decided on the latter. It was a dark red (blood red, Owl called it), and nearly matched her hair. Cats had a hell of a time finding a dress long enough for her, but eventually she discovered an attractive royal purple dress that fit pretty well.
 Eventually, everyone was happy with their ensemble. "Very nice," I said. "Are y'all sufficiently feminine, now?"

> I should've kept my mouth shut and just stayed inconspicuous, because they immediately whirled on me with pained expressions.
 "Can it, Shades. It's your turn, now," said Owl.

> I shook my head. "Uhm no I never went for all that frilly getup."
 Copper took to holding up various dresses to my shoulders to see how they fit. "Nuh-uh you gotta look all pretty, too"

> Rolling my eyes, I grumbled, "I don't have anyone to look pretty for, and besides, dresses just aren't my thing"
 Cheeky held up a hideous lime-green skirt and a bright orange top. "Shady, either you find something to wear, or we find it for you," she said menacingly.

> I figured I was fighting a losing battle, and finally got up off of my cushion. "Oh, fine"
 They all grinned at one another as I dug through the masses of clothes, tossing the rejects over my shoulder as I searched.

> "Nope nope nuh-uh no no wouldn't be caught dead in that nope what is this, a hand-me-down from Denton? no way uh-uh no-oh, hey. This one might be tolerable."
 After a bit of tugging, I fished out a dress that looked promising. It was a beautiful deep blue color and made out of some sort of satin-y material. No bows, no frills-not even sleeves, just two broad straps. Cool.

> I ducked behind a changing screen and pulled it on-it fell to my ankles, and had a rather lengthy slit up the right side. I walked back out to show the others, and they all approved.
 "Beautiful. See? The dress isn't biting you, good little article of clothing that it is," remarked Cats.

> I made a face at her, and asked, "So, is that it? Can we go now?"
 "Hardly," replied Flame. "Now we do our hair."

> "Oh, rapture."
 "Doing our hair" took even longer than finding a dress. Hair was braided and re-braided and curled and pinned and twisted and sprayed and manipulated in every way humanly possible. I got off easily with just having my hair done in a few big, loose curls. Fortunately, it wasn't too painful and didn't take long.

> "Now can we go? We've been here for hours!" I whined.
 "We should liven up the pace a little," Piper remarked, securing her bun. "The boys are getting here around seven."

> "Okay, okay. Let's just raid the make-up real fast and then we can go out to the theater," said Copper.
 So we all slapped on some blush and eye shadow and lipstick, and then left the room. I felt rather like a clown in costume, but as I passed a mirror, I stopped to appraise my new look. All of us did look good, and though I didn't admit it, it felt nice.

> The girls and I all traipsed back out into the hallway and to the flight of stairs that curved down into the main theater. Shouts, whistles, and various catcalls from the boys greeted us as we went down the stairs, one by one-Copper's heels were about 6 inches high, and she just about killed herself going down, but eventually made it. I went last. Race was lounging near the foot of the stairs-we saw each other at nearly the same time, and the look on his face was worth a million dollars. Well, a million dollars or all the time spent getting into all that getup. Perhaps being girlish wasn't such a bad thing, after all.
 I shot him a wink, lifted my chin in the

air, and descended the steps with as much grace as I could possibly pull off. I didn't bother saying anything to him as I passed-I figured I wouldn't get much of an answer, anyway, until he picked his jaw up off the floor.

> I walked semi-steadily (I'd been outfitted with a pair of shiny black shoes-they didn't have much of a heel, but it wasn't like I'd worn such shoes before) over to where Mush, Apple, Flame, Spot, and a few others were talking.
 Mush gave me that giant, boyish grin of his. "Hey, Shady! You're a real looker tonight all the girls are," he said, squeezing Apple's hand. I smiled at them.

> Flame was busily fussing over the juxtaposition of Spot's tie, and he was complaining loudly. "Flame no stoppit my tie is fine. Get offa me, girl" Eventually satisfied, she backed off with a sniff. "There. Now you look at least halfway decent."
 "Is 'decent' even in Spot's vocabulary?" I queried, receiving a glare from the latter.

> "Eh, probably not. Say, we're going up to one of the wings for Jack's spiel-c'mon."
 I followed the small group up the flight of stairs that led to the left balcony. "Jack's spiel?"

> "Yeah every year, Jack always feels he's gotta give a speech about the strike and crap," Trapper told me as we all sat down in the cushy red seats. Flame and Spot were on one side of me, and Race just happened to sit down on my left.
 Jack climbed up onto the stage, cleared his throat, and began to ramble on about Pulitzer and the strike and courage and whatnot. I listened patiently for a while, but eventually detached from the happenings down below and turned my attention to more immediate things-like the way Race kept eyeing my neatly crossed legs. That one thigh-high slit up the side of my dress made it a lot easier to walk, but also made it a lot more revealing. I rather liked it, actually, but gave Race a "looky no touchy" glance just the same. He just gave me his most innocent of grins, and I couldn't help smiling back.

> Just as Jack's speech ended, Race leaned over and murmured in my ear, "So, what're you doing after this gig?"
 "Going home. Going to bed. By myself," I replied flatly. "I told you, Race, I'm not-"

> "-interested in being just another face in the crowd, right?" he finished. "Look, doll, did it ever occur to you that you might not be? That I might actually be serious, of all things? That I honestly think you're the most beautiful broad I've ever seen?"
 I widened my eyes, twisting around to face him directly. I half-noticed Flame ushering everyone else back downstairs as I gave my inane reply. "You really think so?"

> "I really think so," the Italian replied quietly. Just as I was mulling over how uncharacteristic this behavior was of him, he added with a sly grin, "Gotta admit, I had quite I scare when I first metcha. First time I'd ever felt attraction towards a guy thought I might be turning into Blink, or something."
 I giggled helplessly. So that explained it. "So, uh, what do you propose?" I inquired.

> "Naah, I don't want to propose yet," he quipped, then got serious again. "Shady be my girl."
 I hesitated momentarily. Anyone within a three foot radius could just feel the electricity between us, but I was Shady, the girl who'd always balked at entering any sort of relationship. I then made the mistake of looking up into his eyes, and I was sunk. Something buried very deep inside me knew that this, this was the guy I was made for, and vice versa. I began to whisper a "yes", but before I got the chance, my mouth was sealed with a kiss. It was gentle, but certainly not tentative, and the first kiss I'd ever received-unless, that is, you count the one that was stolen by some kid named Jeremy in the fifth grade. (I've always had the hunch that he would have gladly taken it back to spare himself from being

kicked into the next week.)

> His kiss lingered long after it was broken. It lingered as a warm, tingly feeling that completely filled the inside of me; a feeling I'd never get tired of.
 Once I could think straight again, I gave Race a grin. "So, as I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted yes."

> "Well then I'll be sure to interrupt you more often."
 I stood up, straightened my dress, and pulled him to his feet. "C'mon, boy let's go join the party."

> <center>

End
file.